DCCCD’s Strategic Plan for Online Learning Programs

How the Dallas County Community College District used the OLC Quality Scorecard to expedite its path to quality online learning programs.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD, or the District), one of the largest community colleges in the US, with seven separately accredited colleges and various service centers, serving approximately 75,000 students, lacked a holistic view of its online learning programs, which had developed organically over two decades.

The District turned to the OLC Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Programs to assess quality and create an improvement plan mapped closely to accreditation policy and standards.

Over a 14-month period beginning in February 2016, the District adopted the OLC Quality Scorecard internally, customizing it to the unique needs of its large and diverse institution, applying it to the District overall and to its individual colleges.

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THE CHALLENGE: ORGANIC GROWTH OBSCURED LACK OF A HOLISTIC ONLINE STRATEGY

As one of the largest community college districts in the country, the constituents of the Dallas County Community College District can sometimes feel miles apart in terms of the work they do and the students they serve.

DCCCD’s LeCroy Center has historically supported the District’s online activity and has made a significant contribution to distance learning across Texas and the US through the development of telecourses. Over the past two decades, the District’s online learning and teaching programs have rapidly expanded, but their development has generally been organic.
Given a diversity of approaches to online learning and teaching, DCCCD realized it needed an overarching strategy to ensure it was delivering on its promises to students. Terry Di Paolo, PhD, the District's Executive Dean of Online Instructional Services, was tasked with determining a path to a holistic strategy that would ensure consistent quality in online programs across the District. Di Paolo and his colleagues at the LeCroy Center began by bringing representatives together from across the District to talk about online learning and teaching. Key stakeholders were faculty and the District's Faculty Association were closely involved, in fact partners, in the process.

“There are points at which you pause and come together to ask, ‘Is what we’re doing good for our institution? For our students? For our community?’, explains Di Paolo. “This was about us all knowing the direction we wanted to travel in. To get where you want to get to, you need to know where you are at, and that's where the OLC Quality Scorecard came in.”

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THE SOLUTION: CHOOSING THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE CHALLENGE

At the time Di Paolo undertook this assignment, he was not entirely familiar with the OLC Quality Scorecard. It was unclear to him whether it was the right tool for the District.

“I had reservations about whether this was a tool that would work in our context – a district as complex as ours,” he explains. “We’d been aware of other quality products that look at the quality of the course experience. But we were being asked to look at quality across the board—the twenty-thousand-foot view. With their focus on courses, these other products weren't going to help us.”

Di Paolo undertook a due diligence review of the OLC Quality Scorecard to see if it would meet the District’s needs. In December of 2015, he attended a Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges workshop focused on the scorecard, presented by Kaye Shelton, PhD.

“It was an amazing session,” Di Paolo recalls. “One strong component was the chance to talk about aspects of the scorecard with other colleges. All of us were looking at the scorecard within our context, but we hadn't committed yet. That workshop was invaluable.”

As he explains, the OLC Quality Scorecard was designed for programmatic inquiry—the degree program. But the District was trying to look across its entire operation. Di Paolo was initially skeptical about whether the scorecard could do this.

"I knew after that session that, yes, this could do it,” he says. “We could adapt it minimally to apply to our District and to the individual colleges.”

That initial immersion enabled Di Paolo to return to DCCCD and confidently tell his colleagues what the scorecard could do for them. In the month following the workshop, Di Paolo and his team discussed what he had learned about the scorecard and put together a plan to adopt it at DCCCD.

“As we moved through the scorecard, you really saw a commitment to what we were doing. You could tell this was having an impact.”
Inspiring Meaningful Participation in the Process

In February 2016, Di Paolo and his team kicked off their 14-month project plan for executing the scorecard. They arranged the scorecard categories within four phases, reordering some categories so that they could start the process with two areas they felt offered a safe and easy initiation: Institution Support and Technology Support. Starting with these categories allowed those completing the OLC Quality Scorecard at all the District's colleges to engage with the process. Di Paolo says they were able to easily change the sequencing because the scorecard is quite modular.

Initially, there was a great deal of discussion around what was going on in the online classroom. But as Di Paolo explains, “It turned out the Quality Scorecard wasn't a microscope shining a light on this—that's not what the scorecard does.”

It wasn't long before the internal conversation changed. The scorecard participants realized this is about various groups—the student experience, faculty, administration, staff, as well as the interface between the institution and the wider community as well.

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DCCCD’s Customized Approach to the OLC Quality Scorecard

The District is very active, with a number of projects in motion at any one time. Di Paolo was concerned at the outset about the potential for project fatigue, so he worked hard to organize the DCCCD's approach to the scorecard in a way that would foster participation and build confidence in the process.

Each of the District's colleges organized its own team to respond to scorecard questions. This intentional structure lent itself to the way the District was structured.

For each item in a category, the college teams were asked to respond for their college as well as to provide their perception of what was happening across the District, scoring each item on a scale of zero to three. Then, they had to provide a reason for each score.

One of the initial revelations was that the individual colleges had little understanding of the District’s overall approach to many of the items being measured. Team members could confidently report on why they scored a particular number for their college. But they would often leave the score for the District blank, and that was because they simply didn't know.

The college teams would submit scores to Di Paolo. Only four people saw all the scores. This was meant to ease participants' concerns around who would see the scores. It allowed participants to answer candidly, without fear of repercussions. It also eliminated grand-standing in responses. Often the answer was a simple, “I don't know.”

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The college team members came up with their scores based on three inputs: how they scored their own college; how they scored the District; and commentary to support their own score.

Di Paolo and his team would then compile all the scores for each item from each college into a single score for that item, providing an explanation for how they determined the final score. After logging and reviewing all the scores, Di Paolo and his team would then determine a single score for the District overall. He admits this wasn't a science, it was a bit of an art.
In addition to scoring the specific items in each category, Di Paolo asked each college team to provide five recommendations for quick fixes and five long-term improvements for each category.

Each phase started with sending out the phase packet (reconstructed rubrics – simply put in a format that was easy to score) with a deadline assigned for returning. Each phase involved 20-40 people.

Di Paolo and his team would work on the scores and then gather all those involved—there were 20-40 people involved in each phase—to report back the findings from across the entire District. To reinforce the findings, these reporting included workshops that were designed to demonstrate some real struggles that had emerged in the scoring.

"Everything we created we gave back to the college teams with instructions to share,” says Di Paolo. “As we moved through it you really saw a commitment to what we were doing. You could tell this was having an impact—I started to get requests to provide overviews to others in the District who were not directly involved with the scorecard."

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RESULTS: FINDINGS IN HAND, NOW WHAT?

After completing the OLC Quality Scorecard process in April 2017, DCCCD gathered its top administrators in a room to report the results. During this session, administrators engaged in conversations with the college teams about where the District's online programs were at, and where they should go next. As an institution, they realized they needed to take a holistic look and make some changes.

"We reframed how we talk about studying online,” says Di Paolo. “And we began a conversation about future direction to illuminate how the scorecard's findings apply to accreditation."

This conversation pointed to the need for improvements to address requirements of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). DCCCD was able to map its distance education policy to compliance steps and procedures, combining the scorecard's recommendations with its own mapping to SACS requirements.

Rather than creating a plan from scratch to address areas that require improvement, DCCCD is using the OLC Quality Scorecard as the basis for its going-forward plan.

"If we see that we are not delivering quality in certain areas, we want to get there as quickly as possible,” says Di Paolo. "The OLC Quality Scorecard is helping us do just that, because it's not just an evaluation tool. It is the 'plan in the can.' And it can be the plan for you regardless of your institution.”

With its holistic view of the District's online programs in hand, DCCCD understands the areas that need improvement and will now begin to execute on the plan derived from the OLC Quality Scorecard. This benchmark will enable the District to undertake the scorecard process again in the future, to gauge its progress and help fine tune its strategy going forward.